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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [ASAC](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI SUNNI MOSQUE BOMBED

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: An unknown assailant(s) attacked the most popular Sunni mosque in Baku on August 17 during prayers, killing three and wounding approximately eight individuals at the Abu Bakr mosque. The assailant used two grenades, according to local press. This level of attack against a mosque is unprecedented in Azerbaijan. There is no hard information on who was responsible for the attack, but one local Islamic commentator suggested three potential attackers: an Iranian surrogate, a local Shia jamiat, or one of the radical splinter groups that have left the mosque because they perceive that the head imam is an infidel. End Summary.

Preliminary Facts

¶2. (S) On August 17 at approximately 21:00, an unknown assailant or assailants launched an attack against the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku. There are only fragmentary details on the operation in local press. RSO and GRPO are reaching out to contacts within the Ministry of National Security (MNS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) for more information.

¶3. (C) According to reports from Trend News and [www.day.az](#), an unknown person broke one of the mosque's windows and threw two hand grenades through the hole. The attack occurred during a prayer time; three people were killed and eight wounded. The mosque's imam Ganimet Suleymanov was lightly wounded during the attack. The assailant fled the scene of the crime; there is no indication the attacker has been apprehended. In an early indication that the GOAJ is taking the case seriously, the heads of the MIA and MNS were on-hand after the attack, overseeing the preliminary investigation.

¶4. (C) A local Islamic website ([www.azerislam.az](#)) carried several photos of the attack, which show a hole in the mosque's window and a pool of blood on the floor. A youtube video of the mosque's interior is also available online ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=1 wksvdz8rc](#)). The 30-second video scans damaged sections of the mosque's inner wall.

Unknown Attacker

¶5. (C) At this point, local contacts have no additional information about who was behind the attack. Baku State University professor and Islamic expert Altay Geyushev told us that many actors could be behind the attack, but at this early stage, one can only theorize about who is responsible. Geyushev laid out three potential scenarios. First, an

Iranian-backed surrogate could have sought to stir inter-religious tensions by attacking one of Azerbaijan's key symbolic Sunni mosques. Second, a local Shia jamiat could have attacked Abu Bakr mosque in part to assert Azerbaijan's Shia identity. Finally, a splinter group from the Abu Bakr mosque could be behind the attack to lash out at the mosque's leadership and attendees who they perceive as infidels. Anar Yusufzade -- a young Sunni Muslim who studied theology in the United States and Malaysia and sometimes prays at Abu Bakr -- told us it is impossible at this point to discern who is behind the attack. Yusufzade was confident the GOAJ would vigorously pursue the case because of the GOAJ's specific interest in uprooting terrorism and its broader interest in maintaining good relations between Azerbaijan's Shia and Sunni communities.

Comment

¶6. (C) The Embassy notes that Abu Bakr mosque is a key symbol in Azerbaijan's Sunni landscape; it is one of or the most well-attended Sunni mosques in Baku. (Several thousand probably attend the mosque for Friday prayers, but there reportedly were only up to a few hundred praying at the mosque during the attack.) There has never been an attack on an Azerbaijani mosque of this magnitude.

¶7. C) The mosque is widely perceived by the general public as the central Wahabbi or Salafist mosque in Baku. It was constructed in 1997 with the assistance of the Azerbaijani branch of the Kuwaiti Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage. The mosque's chief imam, Ganimet Suleymanov, is a young, charismatic cleric who studied at Saudi Arabia's World Islamic University of Medina. The mosque was temporarily closed down and re-opened in 2001. Several waves of radical splinter groups have left the mosque, accusing Suleymanov of colluding with the government or watering down his message. These individuals refer to themselves as "khavarich" (those that go out or leave). There is a widespread perception that while Suleymanov is popular and theologically well-educated, he cut a deal with the GOAJ, as many local contacts report that it would be impossible for an openly anti-GOAJ and anti-secular mosque to keep its doors open. The Embassy believes it is very plausible that Iran or a khavarich network have launched the attack.

¶8. (C) The majority of Azerbaijanis know little about the differences separating Sunnis from Shias. Most Azerbaijanis perceive that Azerbaijan is a rare reservoir of interconfessional cooperation, where Shia and Sunni Muslims can pray in the same mosque. Many Azerbaijanis instinctively are afraid of Salafis or Wahabbis derogatorily referring to them as "sakkalilar" (bearded people), "garasakalilar" (black-bearded people) or jesting at Wahabbis preference for wearing pants that stop above their ankles. Among non-religious and practicing Azerbaijanis alike, the attack will raise questions about the perception of Azerbaijan as a country of inter-confessional cooperation. The Embassy also notes that alongside the slow, but steady growth of Islam among Azerbaijanis, there is an increasing understanding of the differences between Shia and Sunnis. Local contacts report that as part of this process, there have been a growing number of non-violent debates -- often focusing on religious rituals -- among young, religious Sunnis and Shias.

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